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Leni Sorensen

Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation

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Reflection: Water from the Enslaved South to a South Dakota Farmstead

Leni Sorensen*

When I reflect on the nexus between women and water, I think back to examples from both my own life and from my area of study and work, slavery in the U.S. In one phase of my life (from 1974-1982) my husband and I farmed 160 acres in South Dakota. On the farm, we had only a cistern into which we stored 500 gallons of water at a time. Several times a month my husband brought home our water in a huge plastic container strapped to the bed of our big old farm truck. At first we used a hand pump to water our milk cows, sows, ewes, and a large flock of hens.

Then there were the four five-gallon pails full that had to be pumped for use in the house. I can well remember and still tell you exactly how far those five gallon pails of water lasted for a family of four for a day and how heavy they were to carry across the yard, especially in winter. If it couldn't be done with twenty gallons of water then it didn't get done. And I must confess I drove all our dirty clothes eleven miles to the nearest laundromat once a week.

Eventually we had the resources to install an electric pump at the cistern with a faucet for watering the animals. We also ran a cold water line to the house with a faucet at my sink. It made daily life much easier. My experience made me truly value the importance of water access for women worldwide.

Fresh, clean water has always been a luxury. In my research as an historian of the slave South, disease has been a central theme. Women in 19th century America, both black and white, free and enslaved -- and particularly poor women in cities -- struggled to gain access to clean water. Without a working knowledge of the germ theory (which was not well articulated till the late 1880s) people crowded into city slums, military camps and institutions suffered from waterborne fecal contamination, disease bearing organisms, and other contagions caused by lack of hygiene. The wealthy had their share of health problems, but with servants to haul and heat water, more spacious living quarters, and better nutrition, they were not as likely to die in great numbers when waterborne disease struck (Savitt 1981).

Out in rural areas, particularly those of the antebellum south, rivers and streams often carried fecal matter scoured from upstream plantations downstream during spring or summer flooding. One example comes from 1814 on a plantation in rural Albemarle County, Virginia. The slave cabins had been built on a flat area within 50

feet of the waterline of Buck Mountain Creek, the major source of drinking water. Hogs and poultry left fecal matter all throughout the area and humans used the surrounding land to empty night time chamber pots and for daytime elimination as well. It is no wonder that when typhoid from contaminated water erupted on the site about fifty slaves and several whites were made very ill. People as far away as fourteen miles downstream were also affected by the epidemic.(Savitt 1981).

For the past twenty-six years I have lived six miles from the place of that long-ago epidemic. The area is almost as rural as it was then, although homeowners today have wells with dependable pumps and running water in their houses and barns. In a particularly cool turn of fate I seem to have been rewarded for paying my 'water dues' all those years ago. Our house is on land with an artesian well (water under natural pressure)! The well is 169 feet deep -- I know this because we've had to pull the pump for replacement twice over the years -- and there is a persistent overflow of well over 40 gallons a day at ground level. The children and I dug a large pond to catch that water and eventually after housing the koi and the water lilies it overflows into a drainage pipe that takes it to the front flower bed. It is a grace for which I am truly thankful.

Works

Cited

Savitt, Todd. 1981. *Medicine and Slavery: The Diseases and Health Care of Blacks in Antebellum Virginia*. Univ of Illinois.

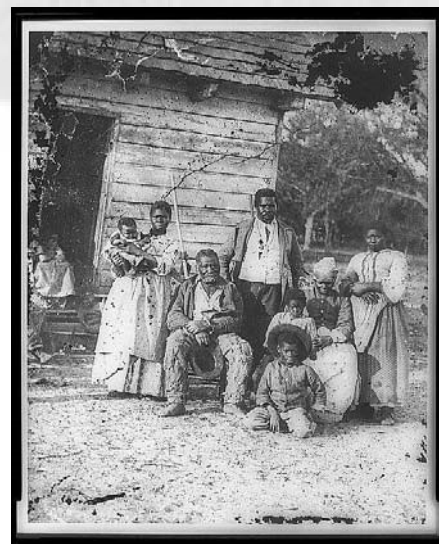


Photo of family on a plantation in Beaufort, South Carolina, circa 1862, Timothy O. Sullivan

*Leni Sorensen
African-American Research Historian
Thomas Jefferson Memorial Foundation at Monticello, Charlottesville, VA
doc.leni@gmail.com